

Opening Statement of the Honorable Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Hearing on “Oversight of FirstNet and Emergency Communications”
March 14, 2013

(As Prepared for Delivery)

In last year's Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act, Congress created the First Responder Network Authority. FirstNet is an independent entity within the NTIA tasked with implementing a nationwide interoperable public safety broadband network. That's no small task. On the first of today's two panels, we will hear from FirstNet, states, a former chief of the FCC Public Safety Bureau, and private sector representatives on what progress is being made and where we should go from here.

The legislation as adopted was not my preferred approach for many of the reasons expressed in today's prepared testimony. I favored construction from the bottom up, not the top down, with certain minimum interoperability requirements and commercial providers running the network in partnership with the states. That approach is by no means guaranteed by the legislation as finally passed. But we must do our best to implement that model within the confines of the law if this endeavor is going to succeed. We owe it to the state and local first responders that risk their lives for ours, the men and women who are the literal boots on the ground. And we owe it to the taxpayers, who funded it up front with up to \$7 billion in federal revenue, and who will fund it over the long-haul through their state and local taxes.

I am a firm believer that the work of Congress begins, not ends, when a bill is enacted into law. Even at this early stage, a recent forum of prospective participants highlighted concerns about how FirstNet is being administered and how the public safety broadband network will be realized. I look forward to exploring some of those concerns today. For example, will FirstNet meet the needs of both rural and urban parts of the country? Will it bring the needed innovation and efficiency of the commercial sector to public safety communications? Will FirstNet conduct open and transparent proceedings to ensure all potential stakeholders are heard?

As today's witnesses can attest, funding FirstNet will also be an essential element of making the network a reality. I was encouraged to hear Senator Rockefeller say at this week's FCC oversight hearing that the agency should conduct the incentive auctions in a way that maximizes participation and revenue. I agree that this will best ensure our public safety objectives are met.

We have learned time and again that in times of natural and national disaster communication among our first responders is key. Ensuring communication lines are open to the public is equally important. With our second panel, we will examine the Emergency Alert System, Wireless Emergency Alerts, and 9-1-1 service.

As former broadcasters, my wife Mylene and I fondly recall running our required weekly tests of the broadcast emergency alert system. However, despite its more than 60 years of existence in one form or another, the EAS was only recently tested on a national level. While more than 90 percent of the stations properly ran the test message, technical challenges prevented stations in my home state of Oregon and elsewhere from receiving the message. This could have been catastrophic in a real emergency and must be resolved in short order.

Broadcast alerts are a critical part of our emergency infrastructure, but emergency systems — like all communications media — have changed significantly over the last 20 years. In 1993 there were only 13 million cell phone subscribers in America. That was less than 5 percent of the population. Today, the broadcast emergency alert system is part of the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System—IPAWS—that incorporates broadcast, cable and satellite video programming distributors as well as more granularly targeted alerts to wireless devices. I look forward to our witnesses giving us a better picture of the successes and challenges with the alerting systems.

Finally, while getting timely emergency information to the public is critical to emergency response, getting information from the public is just as crucial. Sadly, emergencies occur every day in our homes, in our offices, in our cars, and on the streets. This is the world of our 9-1-1 call centers. While no less devastating to those involved, these emergencies are often of a small scale, affecting just a few people. Every now and then, however, they occur on a large scale, taxing the resources of both the call centers and commercial providers. We cannot design the 9-1-1 system to cover every contingency but we should learn from our experiences to improve it where we can. We also need to discuss how we might incorporate more advanced technologies, which is why this committee incorporated Mr. Shimkus' and Ranking Member Eshoo's Next Generation 9-1-1 Advancement Act in the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act. I look forward to hearing how this national asset is adapting to serve our needs in a broadband world.

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